

# Narrative matters : you do you : teens' coconstruction of narrative, reality and identity on social media

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## **Narrative Matters**

### **You do you: Teens' co-construction of narrative, reality and identity on social media**

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Children's literature is awash with *bildungsromane*, or 'novels of formation' in which a young person makes a physical, spiritual, moral or emotional journey and learns about themselves, the world, or Life with a capital L (Boes, 2006). Examples include *Little Women*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Some win awards, such as Sharon Creech's witty and warm *Walk Two Moons*, whose heroine Salamanca Hiddle takes a physical and psychological road-trip in search of her mother. Others appeal more to adults such as Sue Townsend's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13¾*, whose bittersweet humour delighted grown-ups reading about a childhood even more awkward than their own. All involve an author creating a memorable lead character who is formed or transformed during the narrative.

When adults write children's fiction, the intention is to help young readers make sense of situations they may face and changes they may experience, in order to understand their world. By contrast, teens create their own semi-fictional, semi-autobiographical *bildungsromane* on Instagram, Facebook, WeChat, RenRen and Twitter. Their social media pages can be read as texts which help adults make sense of how teens may see themselves, in order to understand how they want to be seen.

Teens collate, curate and construct their online identities through sharing video clips, photographs and memes, alongside their own thoughts, comments, likes and dislikes. They do this collaboratively, receiving feedback for each post and resulting in an evolving, co-created identity in a shared narrative—a bolder and more wide-ranging act of fiction than ever considered by most novelists. Social media can be seen as quasi-fictional creative platform in three ways, each related to the place of the individual in society: first, as a form of identity co-creation; second, as a renegotiation of privacy, which amounts to a redefinition of an aspect of social reality; and third, placing identity within a social framework. Each involves social media as a locus of teens' experimentation, invention and

innovation—and a valuable counterbalance to the problematisation of teens and social media routinely seen in scholarship on the subject.

First, it has become axiomatic that social media is an exercise in self-presentation (Herring & Kapidzic, 2015). Projecting an online identity is a creative act just as much as choosing what to wear to a party or inventing a fictional character. In each case, the concern is with what the identity will allow the individual to do, and the impact it will have on other people. Both are moments of conscious selection and rejection of alternatives, based on anticipation of social reactions. Moving from children's literature to film, for example, in the Star Wars movies Han Solo is not given a waistcoat to wear because the plot demands he has a fob-watch in its pocket; he wears one because the character demands he should look cool. Just so, a teenager will curate the information they share on social media in order to achieve an image-based goal. That is not to say that such curation is always successful, either for teens or professional creatives. The literary and film worlds have a wealth of unloved fictional characters. And if experts can get it wrong, what more for teens who are finding their way and make errors of judgment when creating their online identities, sharing inadvisedly and commenting rashly. Yet this is not a reason to curtail the creation of such characters, or to see them primarily in terms of the failures.

Second, the developing online relationship between the individual and the group is changing the social reality of privacy, with implications for both. Marwick and boyd (2014) have argued that traditional ideas about privacy presume individualistic control over information, whereas conceptions of privacy on Facebook do not fit that norm. The challenge teens face is to negotiate individual privacy alongside the demands for information made by the logics of social media, "trying to be *in* public without always *being* public" (Marwick & boyd, 2014: 1052). Returning to the arts, in literature an omniscient narrator can expound on what one character feels about another, while cinematography has 'reaction shots' where the audience assesses one character through the eyes of another. In each case, the author/director has control. Social media is more complex, leaving the private realm of endeavour of the auteur and opening the creation of online identity to include judgment by outsiders. Social media is one mechanism through which teens are socialised into acceptable behaviour, so that their resulting social media identity is a co-construction, rather than the work of an individual.

Third, social media is a platform for experimenting in social identity. Children tell tall tales in the playground and experiment with possibilities of who they can be, as they rehearse for the future (Senge, 1990). This continues into later life. Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) speak of 'identity play' in which people actively experiment with provisional future selves in a playful way. Teens on social media are likewise constructing an identity, learning how to present themselves appropriately (Goffman, 1959) in order to conform to the prototypical characteristics of roles they are trying on for size (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

Similarly, in an essay that touches on the creative negotiation of identity, Frankfurt (2005) discusses 'bull sessions' at informal social gatherings often fuelled by alcohol or coffee in which people try out new ideas for size, testing opinions to see if they are accepted or rejected by the group. They do so based on an unspoken agreement that if an idea or opinion is considered unacceptable the individual can laugh it off as 'just an idea', and the conversation will move on. The bull session thus allows for social mistakes to be made, forgiven, and not repeated. Social media has the potential to be a similar playful space (Winnicott, 1975), except it is less forgiving. A poorly chosen opinion can go viral, which has driven greater scholarly and media attention on the impact of failed online self-presentation than on when it is successful (e.g. Ronson, 2015).

Yet, balance is vital. While there are risks in social media, there are dangers, too, in its absence. Teens who do not have access to it, in societies where such access is the norm, miss out. Ironically, while social media has spawned the term FOMO (fear of missing out) when teens become distressed to see clear evidence on Facebook and Instagram that others are having more fun than them, this may be weighed against *actual* missing out, of slipping off the radar and not being included in activities organised on social media.

This is not to downplay the risks associated with youthful use of social media; but rather to argue that these risks should be more routinely balanced against the benefits. Social media has commonly come under scholarly criticism for the hazards it exposes teens to, including cyber-bullying (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011), privacy concerns (Livingstone, 2008), negative body image (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016) and most recently fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Clinicians and academics consistently take a problem/solution approach which has led to young people's use of social media being seen primarily in problematic terms. Yet, this attitude demands balance; if such problems were the most common experiences, Facebook would not enjoy over two billion monthly users and advertising revenue approaching US\$40 billion. This essay therefore argues against an overly normative attitude to teens' use of social media to construct identity. It favours instead a more open-minded approach that considers teens' use of social networks as augmentation through novel social norms rather than dilution of pre-existing standards. Social media is creative and innovative—particularly in the hands of teenagers—and merits study for what it adds as much as for what it takes away.

Teens are work-in-progress on social media as in the offline world. The hero at the end of the *bildungsroman* is not the same as at the beginning. The author has taken them on a formative journey through perils and triumph to emerge victorious. Teen's self-presentation online is similar, leading to a clearer sense of self and place in the world: over time on social media they try different tactics, encounter risks and temptations, suffer setbacks and successes, gain and lose friends, and learn lessons so that they emerge, one hopes, as the hero of their own journey.

The question, then, is *where* do they emerge? The hero of literature traditionally returns home bearing a gift—wisdom, power, a weapon—which changes the home they return to (Campbell, 1949). By contrast, at the end of a *bildungsroman*, “the hero grows up, enters into a position, and the social order reasserts itself [and] the return of the protagonist into the social fold is celebrated as an assertion of organic society” says Boes (2010). Rather than changing society, they are subsumed back into it. According to that logic, a teen’s Instagram page represents the influence of society on the individual, as much as the individual creating an identity within society. Conforming to societal role expectations confers legitimacy on the individual (Goffman, 1959). The question, then, of whether a teen’s Facebook or Instagram page is a locus to observe separation from or engagement with a normative social world can lead to a more balanced understanding of how they negotiate self and society.

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